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## Brooklyn Historical Society Bounces Back Institutions

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February 22, 2007

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/49055>

Like the borough from which it takes its name, the Brooklyn Historical Society is experiencing a renaissance. After several years of financial strain, the society has a new president intent on building ties to the community, expanded education programs, and an active and growing board. Last month, the society's Othmer Library, closed for seven years for renovations and the digitizing of the card catalog, reopened to the public. A reception tonight will celebrate the occasion.

The New York City cultural commissioner, Kate Levin, said the library's reopening was an exciting moment. "The Historical Society is now back in full force as the repository of Brooklyn's extraordinary history," Ms. Levin said. The library's reopening is a boon to scholars, students, genealogists and others who wish to use its collections, which have been in storage or unavailable for a decade.

The next step, the president and board members have said, is to build an endowment to prevent a recurrence of the difficulties of the past few years, according to a trustee, James Rossman.

The society's troubles began, ironically, with a windfall: In 1998, it received a \$15 million bequest from a former board member, Donald Othmer, and began to consider renovating its 1881 building, on Pierrepont Street in Brooklyn Heights. At the time, the building's poor condition was a threat to the collections. But the renovation, estimated at \$14 million, ended up costing \$23 million, requiring the museum to cut staff and hours of operation.

Since Deborah Schwartz became the society's president last February, the city and the federal government, as well as numerous foundations, have stepped up to help the society finish the work and reopen the library. The city gave \$2 million in capital funding, and a Brooklyn congresswoman, Nydia Velásquez, secured \$1 million from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

In a coup, the society made an agreement with New York University to house its digital card catalog within NYU's BobCat catalog. "It saves money, it provides access, and it opens the door to the whole universe of users," the society's vice president for collections, Marilyn Pettit, said.

The board has almost doubled in the past three years, to 24 people, and the society's chairman, James Laughlin, said it plans to expand to 35. New board members, like an owner of Brooklyn Brewery, Robin Ottaway, know when they join that they will be expected to make a financial commitment. "It's an institution that needed help and that I could make a difference at," Mr. Ottaway said. "I'm not going to make a difference at MoMA."

The society hasn't fully bounced back to where it was. It is still open for reduced hours — noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday — and has a full-time staff of 16, which is smaller than what it was in the period immediately after the renovation, but a number that Ms. Schwartz thinks is adequate.

Ms. Schwartz intends to maximize the small staff's effectiveness through collaborations with other institutions. At the moment, through a collaboration with the New-York Historical Society and the Weeksville Historical Society in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the society is hosting a small, traveling version of the N-YHS's "Slavery in New York" exhibition, with some material added that relates specifically to slavery in Brooklyn.

Ms. Schwartz, who was formerly the deputy director of education at the Museum of Modern Art, has also expanded the society's education programs. In addition to offering regular education programs that serve 70,000 students and 3,000 teachers a year, the society is the lead partner for a new small public school for sixth through 12th grades, called Lyons Community School, which is opening in the fall in Bushwick. The society is developing a curriculum, not limited to history but also encompassing literature (the society has rich material relating to Walt Whitman and other Brooklyn authors) and environmental science, for which students might investigate the historical changes along the Brooklyn waterfront.

The society's other education programs include teacher training workshops and a semester-long museum studies program for high school students, at the end of which the students will curate a historical exhibition.

"We try to build the programs around kids learning to understand and analyze primary source documents, whether that's a map, a photo, a manuscript, a letter, or a newspaper article," Ms. Schwartz said. "To help kids question what they know about history, to think critically about different points of view and begin to understand that history is a constructed idea."

The collections "are totally remarkable in terms of the history of Long Island as a region," the vice president of the museum division at the New-York Historical Society, Linda Ferber, said. Ms. Ferber, who was formerly the chief curator of the Brooklyn Museum, said she and her staff at the museum used the society's collections constantly, including putting on a show in 1982 called "Brooklyn Before the Bridge," using the society's unsung collection of art depicting historical Brooklyn.

The society was founded in 1863, and much of its collections date to the 19th century or earlier. They include a 17th-century journal by a Dutch traveler, who made drawings of topography and houses; the papers of Henry Ward Beecher, who was a minister nearby at the Plymouth Church; and a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln. The 20th-century materials include correspondence between the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Walter O'Malley, and Robert Moses, about whether the Dodgers could be kept in Brooklyn.

Ms. Schwartz wants to bring the collections into the 21st century, in part through oral histories. One of the first projects has been to collect oral histories from current and past employees of the Independence Community Bank, which was founded in the 19th century and merged several years ago with Sovereign Bank. Some of the people interviewed, including the bank's former chief executive, Charles Hamm, have families going back in Brooklyn for three or four generations, Ms. Schwartz said.

The society is also considering collecting oral histories of jazz musicians, beginning with Randy Weston.

The Independence Community Foundation, which split off from the bank at the time of the merger, is a major supporter of the society. The executive director, Marilyn Gelber, said she is delighted with Ms. Schwartz's efforts to reach out to the community. "I can't tell you how many local people, when we held events there, never knew the place, or never found it welcoming," Ms. Gelber said.

To make the society even more welcoming, Mr. Rossman said, the first floor will soon be cleared out to make room for performances by local artists, including poetry readings and music recitals. The space could also potentially be rented out for parties and become a source of revenue, he added.

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